

# New Haven Register

‘Look at the whole story:’ CT educators rethink lessons on racism, slavery



Meghan Friedmann July 31, 2020 Updated: July 31, 2020 1:17 p.m.

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A team of educators hopes to empower teachers to educate their students about racism and slavery in southern New England - and to do so correctly.

A nationally-renowned scholar, two Connecticut teachers and a state representative, all of whom advocate for a reconfiguration of curricula to incorporate overlooked history lessons, are working together to deliver the program teachers next week.

Sponsored by the Connecticut Association of Independent Schools, the two-day workshop will feature presentations by Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, an associate professor of history at Ohio State University who hosts the podcast “Teaching Hard History: American Slavery”, and by Dennis Culliton, a retired Guilford middle school teacher who launched the Witness Stones Project.

State Rep. Patricia Wilson Pheanious, D-Ashford, will deliver the keynote speech, Culliton said.

Evidence uncovered by Culliton and his students suggests that Pheanious' fifth-great-grandfather served in the American Revolution as a freed man, Culliton said. The project also traced Pheanious' family tree back to two individuals enslaved in Guilford, Montrose and Phillis, according to Culliton.

But Pheanious did not know these parts of her family history until she got a call from Culliton, who has worked with students to research the histories of enslaved peoples in their communities and install memorials called "witness stones" in honor of those people.

### **A sense of belonging**

"I never felt like I didn't belong, but I never felt like I belonged," Pheanious said of growing up as a Black woman in Ashford.

But learning that her ancestors were here since "before there was an America" changed that and gave her "a grounding sense of belonging," she said.

"It gave me a sense of legitimacy," Pheanious said.

An Ashford resident who graduated from E.O. Smith High School in the late 1960s, the local school system gave Pheanious a lot in terms of academics, she said.

But something was missing.

By skirting over the history of Black Americans, the school did not give Pheanious a "sense of myself as a Black woman," she said.

"It's only been as an adult that I realized where that thirst for acceptance, that thirst for acknowledgment, that thirst for feeling like I belong - where it came from," Pheanious said.

It came from not knowing her own history, she said.

### **Overlooked histories**

The gaps in Pheanious' learning experience still manifest decades after she graduated high school, college and law school.

Only recently, for example, did Pheanious learn that thousands of Black men fought in the Revolutionary War, she said.

And the state representative is far from alone.

Rhonan Mokriski, a teacher at Salisbury School who grew up in Madison, did not realize that anyone in the history of his hometown owned enslaved people until he heard Culliton speak at a conference, he said.

Nor did he know that the bridge over Lake Saltonstall, which he used to cross regularly, refers to a man who was involved in the slave trade, Gurdon Saltonstall, he said.

“Teaching and studying history my whole life, I was totally blind to that aspect [of slavery in Connecticut],” Mokriski said.

Now, the educator is preparing to teach a class next semester called “Searching for Slavery in Northwest Connecticut,” he said.

The course aims to recognize individuals who haven’t been recognized throughout history, Mokriski said.

Mokriski, who helped organize the workshop, serves on the CAIS’s Commission on School Growth and Collaboration.

### **It happened here**

In organizing the workshop, Mokriski enlisted the help of Jeffries, host of the podcast “Teaching Hard History,” a show during which Jeffries talks with educators and scholars to share overlooked history lessons.

But he hopes it will be a start for teachers who wish to change the way they educate children about slavery, he said.

One obstacle to teaching about slavery in Connecticut schools is a misconception that slavery was a “Southern problem,” Jeffries said.

When it comes to American history lessons that are “hard to wrap our heads around,” Jeffries said, “we really push back hard against those areas of our past.”

Not only did New England profit off the slave trade, but New Englanders, like Southerners, held enslaved peoples, Jeffries said.

“I think one of the challenges with teaching slavery in Connecticut — in New England if you will — is that we like to think of New England as the cradle of liberty,” Jeffries said.

But New England, and Connecticut, were “involved, and deeply involved” in the institution of slavery, Jeffries said.

And in addition to exploiting Black people, Connecticut participated in the enslavement of Native Americans, another element of local history that residents have yet to truly confront, according to Jeffries.

One of the two key points Jeffries hopes teachers will take away from the workshop is that curricula should examine slavery through a local lens, with emphasis on the reality that racism is a Connecticut issue, Jeffries said.

### **Teaching resistance**

Further, when teachers educate their students about the history of slavery and oppressed peoples, they should also “lead with resistance,” Jeffries said.

That’s the second takeaway he hopes workshop participants will glean next week.

Telling stories of resistance helps humanize oppressed peoples, Jeffries said.

By showing students how enslaved people fought back, educators give students the chance to empathize with the oppressed, according to Jeffries.

“You want them to connect to the people, and that’s what we never get,” Jeffries said. “We’re conditioning our children to connect to, empathize with and see themselves in the enslavers and never in the enslaved.”

Stories of enslavers, Jeffries pointed out, are everywhere. He gave Presidents’ Day as an example of how we commemorate oppressors.

George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison represent just a few of the presidents who owned slaves.

Such commemorations enable us to say, “it [slavery] couldn’t have been that bad, because these are our heroes,” Jeffries said.

### **Sense of urgency**

Culliton, who launched the Witness Stones Project in Guilford in 2017, has been working steadily to expand it to other communities over the past several years.

But the protests against racism and police brutality that followed the death of George Floyd - a Black man killed at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer in May — have given Culliton a renewed sense of urgency.

Classrooms were closed in March after the pandemic arrived. When students return in the fall, Culliton expects them to bring questions, such as: “Why is the world turned upside down? Why would a police officer seemingly arrogantly murder someone in front of a camera? Why are there protests?”

Teachers need to be equipped to answer those questions, Culliton said.

But teaching students about racism has to do with more than the present moment.

It’s important for the future, too.

“If you want to know the whole story, you gotta look at the whole story,” Mokriski said. “And the reason you want to look at the whole story is you want to get better.”

“Now, we have to help turn the minds and hearts, and the policies, that put African Americans and other people of color in a situation that they feel that they have to protest to help understand what’s going on,” Culliton said.

Many schools have launched initiatives around teaching differently, Culliton said.

But, he noted, “there’s so much work to do.”

Teachers can register for the workshop, which is slated for Aug. 3 and 4 and has a \$35 registration fee, at <http://caisct.org/cthardhistory>